A Brief History of the Holiness Movement

By Dr. Brian Black

Holiness people believe that God not only forgives a person of sin, but also removes the nature of sin which causes a person to commit sin. This is known as the experience of sanctification. Once a person is purified of sin, he or she is then baptized with the Holy Spirit. Total consecration to God is necessary for a person to be a candidate to become sanctified. These three components form the core of holiness theology: Total consecration to God; God purifying a person's heart by removing the sin nature; and the filling of a person's heart with the Holy Spirit. (Acts 15:9)

Holiness doctrine has been taught and believed down throughout history, but to a great degree the doctrine was lost in the Middle Ages similar to what happened to the doctrine of justification. The Catholic Church replaced the reality of the experience of holiness with the ritual of confirmation. The purpose of that ritual was to give the recipient the Holy Spirit to empower the candidate to live a holy life. Catholics still teach these two works of grace: baptism to become saved, and confirmation to receive the Holy Spirit.

John Wesley brought this doctrine back into the church, just as Martin Luther did for the doctrine of justification. Wesley emphasized the power of God to save a person from all sin, not only from committing acts of sin, but also purifying the heart from inbred sin. He included the pamphlet, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* in the Methodist Discipline to teach holiness. However, by the 1830s few in the American Methodist Church claimed that they had experienced being sanctified.

Phoebe Palmer was very instrumental in reviving the doctrine of holiness in the Methodist Church. After she personally obtained the experience, she began to encourage and teach others how that faith was necessary to receive this gift of God. She started meetings in her home on Tuesday evening to promote the doctrine of holiness. Phoebe Palmer and her husband, Walter, were personal friends of several of the bishops of the church and the church leadership supported the

spread of the doctrine. She traveled around the country exhorting people to obtain the experience, and authored several best-selling books on the topic.

The emphasis of the doctrine of holiness also jumped outside of Methodist circles as others such as the Congregationalist evangelist, Charles Finney became an outspoken advocate of the doctrine. The holiness theology of Finney was spread through his teaching at Oberlin College. Well-known preachers in the late 1800s such as Dwight L. Moody, R. A. Torrey, and Oswald Chambers also claimed the experience and favored the doctrine.

Shortly after the Civil War several Methodist ministers led by John Inskip began holding independent camp meetings to promote the doctrine. Some of these camps were attended by over 20,000 people. Regional camps were then established along with regional associations which emphasized the doctrine. By the 1880s holiness was the most powerful doctrinal movement in America and seemed to be carrying away all opposition both within the Methodist Church and was quickly spreading throughout many other denominations.

Unfortunately, there was a sudden change in the 1880s. Opposition developed from some of the leaders who opposed the doctrine. They pushed out some of the more radical holiness supporters. Division kept increasing and it became an issue between church loyalty or the doctrine of holiness. Those who stayed in the Methodist Church mainly lost the emphasis of the doctrine although it is still in the Methodist Discipline. Those who left formed the various holiness denominations.

A division occurred in the ranks of the holiness people about 1900 over a new doctrine which claimed that speaking in tongues was the evidence of being baptized with the Spirit. Many formerly holiness people were convinced; yet this doctrine had never been promoted by holiness people throughout history before this time. Those who continued with the Wesleyan position on holiness are known as the Holiness Movement, while those who accepted the tongues as evidence of the Spirit became the Pentecostal Movement.

Holiness is not only the removal of sin from the heart; it should also be lived out in a person's life. Issues regarding how far a person should go in a holy lifestyle led to a number of disagreements in the mid-1900s. Those who were the most emphatic about a holy lifestyle often were forced to organize denominations of their own. Those who emphasize the lifestyle of holy living as well as the theology of holiness are known as the Conservative Holiness Movement. The conservatives would feel that their doctrine and lifestyle best represent the teaching and practices taught in the Bible, the teaching of the Early Church fathers, the teaching of Wesley, and the Holiness Movement in the 1800s and early 1900s.